



Book Review

Modernizing the Mountaineer: People, Power and Planning in Appalachia. David E. Whisnant, Appalachian Consortium Press, Boone, North Carolina, 1980. 296 pages.

Social and economic planning in Appalachia has long been prefaced on the assumption that the region is a poverty-stricken subculture of the greater, more affluent nation. As urbanization and industrialization have provided for the wieldy development of the greater nation, so the thinking has been, the same process could likewise enrich Appalachia. Trapped in this mindset, posits Whisnant in Modernizing the Mountaineer, planners launched an urban-industrial campaign for this 'backward area' predicated on inappropriate and unexamined assumptions. Failing to recognize the consequences of discounting socio-cultural uniqueness, planners instinctively prescribed the urban-industrial development model as a cure for the lagging economy.

Each of the three main sections of the book addresses a particular application of this regional development model. Part I examines the Council of Southern Mountains, an 'umbrella' organization for non-secular Appalachian development. Parts II and III analyze federal and state/sub-state programs, respectively. Through case studies, Whisnant traces for the reader the evolution of planning in Appalachia.

THE VISIONS OF ASSIMILATION

Introduced in 1933 as a project that "touches and gives life to all forms of human concern" and provides "a picture of the world as it might be", the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) was celebrated as the most idealistic and comprehensive planning effort attempted to date in the United States. Claiming that "what God had made one, man was to develop as one," Director David E. Lilienthal envisioned a unified regional development which would treat widespread economic and social problems and integrate natural resource use to the development effort.

During its first two decades TVA tamed 650 miles of the flood prone Tennessee River and its tributaries, built 20 dams, reforested 800,000 acres, and aided more than 68,000 farmers in developing methods of advanced technology farming. In a nation hard-hit by the Depression, employment increased in the valley 20% more

rapidly than in the area outside: The early years of the agency offered great promise.

Beginning in the 1960s, fed by a growing cry for government accountability to the people, the political, social, and resource policies of TVA were subjected to heavy questioning. In weighing costs against benefits many critics charged that the program had lost touch with its mission. To meet escalating power demands TVA had turned from hydropower development to producing electricity through coal-fired generating plants. In so doing, TVA pursued aggressive and destructive policies on strip-mining.

By 1968, TVA had relocated in excess of 125,000 people, condemned 2 million acres of land for hydropower generation, and acquired more than 375 million tons of coal reserves. Purchasing coal "in quantity and on a long-term contractual basis from non-union stripmines," TVA radically altered the structure of the coal industry in Appalachia. TVA's coal-buying policies led to further anti-competitive integration of the industry, cites Whisnant, as large companies that opened stripmines to fill TVA contracts "were owned and operated by multinational energy conglomerates."

As criticism of TVA escalated, the federal government instituted major new development programs to redirect this negative attention. Passed on May 1, 1961 the Area Redevelopment Act (ARA) authorized millions of dollars to be spent in the depressed coal-counties of Appalachia for industrial loans, public facilities, technical assistance programs, and job training. It was the first in a succession of federal-community partnerships that 'guaranteed' to modify regional unemployment.

Whisnant traces the rapid demise of this program to its partnership nature. "For ARA to work, a number of assumptions had to prove tenable: that the necessary jobs should be generated in the private rather than the public sector; ...that the 'private sector' would and could create jobs at a justifiable cost; and that the direct benefits to the entrepreneurs who would receive most of the federal money would in fact 'trickle down' to the unemployed."

The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 inaugurated the War on Poverty in the region. Conceived of by John Kennedy and carried out by Lyndon Johnson, the "hodge-podge of a poverty poultice" suffered weeks in congressional and task force debate which severely weakened the unified strength of the original plan. Refusing to acknowledge that the corporate monopolization of resources that had gradually taken place over the 'development' years in Appalachia had contributed to regional poverty and unemployment, the Johnson Administration designed a program that had little hope of success. "Poverty was to be eliminated by reinforcing and extrapolating the system whose irrational and inequitable operation had destroyed the region in the first place."

As a logical outgrowth of this War on Poverty, the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) was plagued by the same ills as previous programs. In signing the act in 1964 President Johnson called it "the truest example of creative federalism in our time." Whisnant claims, however, that it was much less than creative in its approach to development. The program failed to address the region's most critical needs: unemployment, the proliferation of low-wage industry, absentee ownership, inequitable taxation, and lack of essential human services. The focus of ARC was, instead, to complete a highway corridor system, to encourage further industrial development, and to sponsor the building of non-controversial vocational education schools. At the same time, ARC portrayed to the "rest of the world" a vision of the Appalachian people as "quaint cultural anachronisms, insulated by pride from the realities of modern life."

In the years following its inception in 1913, the Council of Southern Mountains assumed a certain preeminence in Appalachia. From its headquarters at a small Kentucky college, the Council served as a forum for some limited debate concerning policies for regional development, yet prescribed policies disappointingly shallow. Reflecting the administration's views and those of conservative missionaries, claims Whisnant, the Council broached programs for Appalachia which were paternalistic and forged to cosmetically treat the regional problems. It called for "god fearing homes; agriculture fitted to the mountains; better roads, schools, and recreational opportunities; and stronger churches."

By 1960 the Council was heavily criticized for its development policies. Sandwiched between its traditional belief in missionary politics and a need to respond to such controversial issues as resource exploitation, housing shortages, and rising unemployment, Council members concluded that relocation was imperative. The move to the coalfields of Dickenson County, Virginia stemmed from a perceived need to be closer to the problems besetting the region and

to help develop a regional consciousness which might aid in returning control of Appalachia to its own residents. A major initial goal was the fabrication of development strategies which would avoid the tendency to assimilate mountain culture to that of mainstream America.

To what degree this regional consciousness, self-control, and local development strategies have materialized is in question. Subject to staff disagreements, budget constraints, and an environment largely controlled by non-poor, non-resident, and non-working class people, the Council "has been largely an anachronism during its final decade." Interest, cites Whisnant, had shifted to single issue-oriented groups at the community level, and to federal programs on the regional scale.

Whisnant comes finally to conclude that regional development is best practiced as proceeding from cultural conservation as fundamentally as from technical enterprise. Debates, he claims, over the technical details of development theory and practice are at most secondary to an understanding of the deeply rooted spiritual, psychic, and cultural values of each region.

Throughout the book Whisnant has sought to illustrate Appalachian developers as extenders of mainstream American culture. By turning only to the culture external to the region as a yardstick by which to measure program success, these planners failed to address local needs and to respect a local cultural tradition. The failure of program after program which sought to industrialize and urbanize Appalachia speaks to the inappropriateness of the model's application to this culturally distinct region.

The implications for future planners in the region are not obvious: what Whisnant fails to offer is a viable alternative to this model. He critically and comprehensively examines each development program, but evidences no creative response to the problems identified and agreed upon. Perhaps these 'problems' are, as he maintains, symptomatic of the uneven capitalistic development of Appalachia. If so, and if we will, as he claims in summary, "ultimately get only the kind of development allowed by our level of cultural sensitivity, sanctioned by our values, demanded by our ethics," what will that be?

David Whisnant is a native North Carolinian who has written predominantly about Appalachia.

Jean Crews is a Masters candidate in the Department of City and Regional Planning, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.